

The Assembly of the Saints
Lesson 1 – How can we know what God wants?
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Introduction: Our God has ordained local churches as part of His plan.

- A. God's eternal plan is to bring a people to be with Him forever. **(Eph 1:3-6)**
 - 1. It is humbling and amazing to consider how the enemies of God were converted into becoming adopted children.
 - 2. We understand that God's plan involved an ongoing process of growth and change for every Christian. **(Eph 4:14-16)**
- B. The local church was part of the plan of God to accomplish this great work.
 - 1. The Lord ordained that each church have spiritual men who can lead and teach other Christians in their personal growth. **(Acts 14:23; 1 Pt 5:1-4)**
 - 2. We are going to look specifically at a specific assembly that the Lord requires of every church. What are the purposes for such an assembly? How should that assembly be conducted?
 - 3. By looking carefully at the mind of God we can better function as a local group of God's people!

I. How should we read the New Testament?

- A. There are some who claim that the New Testament is a "story" or "narrative" and as a consequence has no binding law for future generations to be found in its pages.
 - 1. While in the story there are specific instructions given to specific people within a specific culture, these cannot be viewed as a law for us.
 - 2. A story is not about "deriving laws" but an appeal to our imagination so we can create our "own story" for our culture.
 - 3. With this approach there can be no appeal to authority, pattern or even logic. We must ask the question: "What kind of book is the New Testament?"
 - 4. With this approach one cannot begin to "restore New Testament Christianity" or even want to. The New Testament would be insufficient for us to accomplish this according to some.
- B. We can find a clear and definite answer from Jesus and the apostles concerning how we read and obey the words He has given us. **(Jn 12:48-50)**
 - 1. The life of Christ tells us about the perfect will of the Father that was given to Jesus and then later was to be given to the apostles. **(Jn 5:30; 8:28-32)**
 - 2. This will was to be perfect and thus was to transcend culture, nationality and changing times. **(Acts 17:30-31)**
 - 3. Can we have the words of Christ for us today? God gave a "form of doctrine" through the Apostles that was for every generation. **(Rom 6:17-18, Acts 2:38-39)**

4. The early church carefully stayed within the apostle's doctrine. If they had no instruction from them then they did nothing. **(Acts 15:23-24)**
5. This is how they glorified God! **(Col 3:17; 1 Pt 4:11)**

Questions to consider

1. How do we know that local churches should exist?
2. What is the purpose of a local church? **(Eph 4:11-12)**
3. Is the New Testament simply a narrative or story and not a law? What would be some implications of how we answer this question?
4. Did Jesus expect His words to be delivered in a manner that all of His followers, in all future generations could hear and obey them? Prove your answer!
5. Was the New Testament a complete revelation? What are the implications of this truth?

II. What was the work of the apostles with local churches?

- A. What was the nature of the work of the apostles? When you answer this question you will have the answer to what kind of book is the New Testament!
 1. The work of the apostles was crucial to the work of Jesus Christ. **(Jn 16:13; 15:16, 26-27; Eph 3:3-5)**
 2. Jesus would have no voice, no instruction and even no offer of salvation without the Apostles and prophets having both spoken and written His word. **(Acts 2:38-39)**
 3. The early church was founded upon and sustained by the apostle's doctrine. **(Acts 2:42; Eph 2:20)**
 4. Remember that the Holy Spirit was guiding the delivery of the word and Jesus promised that His word would be preserved! **(Mt 24:35)**
- B. How did the early church view the epistles from the apostles?
 1. God showed all the importance of the Apostle's work. **(1 Cor 12:28; 1 Thess 2:6; 1 Pt 3:2)**
 2. Satan tried to attack genuine apostles while providing counterfeits of his own making. **(2 Cor 11:5, 13; Rev 2:2)**
 3. If Satan can close the writings of the Apostles to the minds of Christians then he has successfully defeated God's plan. How we view their writings is critical!
- C. The entirety of the teachings and practices of the early church came from the apostles.
 1. The Apostles simply "handed down" what they had received from Jesus. When the apostles uses the words "tradition, delivered and received" they are speaking of God's will being delivered. **(1 Cor 11:2, 23; 15:3)**
 2. To fail to obey the "tradition" delivered from the apostles is to forsake Jesus Christ Himself. **(2 Thess 3:6, 12, 15)**

3. When the Holy Spirit gave an epistle given to one church, it could be given to other churches and to other generations with the full expectation of being understood. **(Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27; 2 Pt 3:1-2)**

Questions to consider

1. What was the connection between the work of Christ and the work of the apostles? What if the apostles were never sent forth?
2. What was the relationship between the apostles and the early church?
3. How does the apostles' work impact us today? Is that work sufficient?
4. How did Satan try to destroy the work of the Apostles in the 1st century? How can he destroy it today?
5. How was a church to handle an epistle of an apostle?
6. What could an epistle written to one church be freely given to another church in another location and expect to be understood?

III. Did the apostles give sufficient instruction for there to be a uniform practice and teaching among the churches?

- A. Paul plainly stated that there was an expected uniform teaching and practice among the churches of God. **(1 Cor 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33-34, 37)**
 1. Did God wish that there be uniform teaching and practice in the 1st century? Does He wish that happen today?
 2. How then can we know what to teach and practice? God has made it clear that a perfect revelation was once and for all delivered! **(Jude 3)**
 3. Let's take all that was delivered on any given subject and let's simply stay within that which was delivered. If we have no instruction then we will do and say nothing!
- B. Respect for the apostle's work and writings are essential to pleasing God and going to heaven.
 1. Paul pointed out the absolute authority that was found in that which was delivered. Even he would be rejected if he varied from it! **(Gal 1:6-10)**
 2. To change or ignore any writing from an apostle would be to sever yourself from the blessings from God. **(Rev 22:18-19)**
 3. Consider who God honors in heaven! The work of the apostles is much more than a narrative! **(Rev 18:20; 21:14)**

Questions to consider

1. How do we know that the apostles expected uniform teaching and practice among all the churches? Is this possible? How?
2. How do we know that we have all we need to know in the New Testament?
3. How can we show disrespect for the apostles writings?
4. Will heaven recognize the work of the apostles? Why is this truth significant?

The Form of the New Testament

"Why isn't the New Testament written in legal form; i.e., broken down into encyclopedic categories and lists? Instead, it contains much historical, biographical and personal material. Yet we are asked to believe that this is God's law for us today. How can this be?"

The above paragraph sets forth a question which we believe is legitimate and needs to be carefully considered.

As a point of fact, some of the New Testament does have catalogs or lists of things both right and wrong (see Galatians 5; 1 Corinthians 6; Ephesians 4-6; Colossians 3-4; etc.). Therefore, the negative effect of the question is somewhat mitigated. Our remarks will be directed to the bulk of the New Testament - why it should indeed be considered as our law and standard of authority.

Consider what would be lost to us if the New Testament consisted only of categorized lists of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not's":

1. The personality of the speakers. Specific statements in legal form tell us very little about the law-giver. We may conclude that the author of a law forbidding stealing held stealing in abhorrence. Beyond that we are left in the dark. But not so in the New Testament. When Jesus laid down the law that we should "love one another," His inspired biographies reveal how He lived this law every day of His life. This serves to give a moral force to the law which would not otherwise be possible. Much of the "non-legal" portions of the gospel set forth the sinlessness or holiness of Christ. Man is more inclined to heed the precepts of a righteous law-giver than those of evil-doers. Therefore, the scriptures which tell of the holiness of our Lord do not distract from the authority of the New Testament. On the contrary, such accounts establish its authority!

2. Corroborative Material. The historical statements in the New Testament regarding rulers, customs and events, are necessary in that they furnish corroborative evidence for the accuracy of the gospel. The accounts of the miracles were given for the stated purpose of creating confidence in Jesus (John 20:30-31). That which serves to confirm a document surely cannot be cited as evidence against its authority.

3. Illustrative Material. Laws become exceedingly difficult to apply when dealing with complex situations. However, Jesus cut through this problem by demonstrating the truth in stories, illustrations, and parables. He couched the underlying law in language that only the hard of hard would fail to understand. Truths taught in "doctrinal passages" are exemplified in such historical books as Acts. The New Testament is thus made meaningful and alive for those who will recognize it.

There may be other considerations that should be added. But a New Testament without the above material is unthinkable. *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable..."* - 2 Timothy 3:16. Every word in the New Testament is there by God's design. Therefore, an encyclopedic catalog of laws would be far inferior to what we have now - God's living law for mankind. -- Bob West, *The Milpitas Messenger*, February, 1996